

History of Medicine in Oregon Project
Dr. Edward Wah, DMD
February 14, 2007

Interviewed by Janet Worthington
Oregon State Parks Department

00:01:00 **JW** This interview with Dr. Edward Wah was conducted on February 14, 2007, at the Oregon Medical Association, Corbett Street, Portland, by Janet Worthington.

2:00 **EW** Doc Hay was a distant family member. When his partner Lung On passed away, he turned to us to help him because he was going blind. My dad being the only relative in the area he knew of, he was notified and in late '41 he got a friend to drive him to John Day, surveyed the situation, and realized he had to go back to John Day to take care of him. In those days, driving from Northern Idaho to John Day was quite a chore. He stayed to take care of Doc Hay and we stayed in Idaho until after school was out, then in the summer of '42 we moved to John Day. It was quite a shock to me to go from (luxury) to the (primitive) conditions.

4:00 **EW** For the first year we stayed in the building with Doc Hay. My dad had to find a little house, move it to the Kam Wah Chung area, it took pretty much all the next year until we could move into a house with (facilities).

5:36 **EW** We weren't the only ones. There were a lot of homes in John Day then that didn't have indoor plumbing. Getting used to the outdoor facilities was the hardest part.

6:30 **EW** My father was the only relative in the states that they could find. My dad also had knowledge of herbs, so it was natural that he took over Doc Hay's practice. He was able to read the books, etc.

7:30 **EW** Doc Hay taught him the art of pulse diagnosis. The patient would come in not saying a thing about their symptoms. He would take their pulse for three or four minutes and then tell the patient what was wrong with him. If they had had previous surgeries, he would be able to pick up where they had surgery.

8:30 **EW** My younger brother and I were the only ones who moved to John Day. I was in the fourth grade and Hank was in the third grade.

9:00 **EW** (Referring to the building diagram). Doc Hay being blind didn't need a lot of light, so the innerds were pretty dim most of the time. Doc Hay's bedroom was just to the left of the entry and I never did go in there. Straight on was where a lot of the herbs were, and to the left of that was also another storeroom for herbs.

10:30 **EW** To the right was a wall of cans that he would pull out with herbs and being blind he would still be able to go in there and pull out the right herbs. It was quite an experience to see him doing it. To the right of that was the kitchen, and to the left of that were a couple of bunk beds my brother and I slept on, and behind that was where my Mom and Dad stayed. We weren't able to roam around in there because of the herbs, but mainly we ate, slept, and did our homework in that area. We weren't able to go upstairs, it was locked and off limits.

12:30 **EW** All I heard was it was a sand floor and a lot of whiskey was hidden in the sand because it was prohibition. I think they even auctioned some off for fund raisers.

13:15 **EW** The area was heated by a cook stove in the kitchen and a pot bellied stove. He had an old upright floor model radio that he'd listen to the progress of the war all night long. He'd sit in a comfortable chair and smoke cigars and listen to the radio all night long.

14:15 **EW** Just the front door is the only door we used. There was another door but we never used it. I think it was nailed shut.

14:50 **EW** Doc Hay was a very friendly person and he always had the peanut butter taffy sitting in a bowl for visitors and a pot of tea and some clean cups for anyone who walked in. I guess the story goes the youngsters could go in any time and ask for a taffy.

16:00 **EW** The supply part of it was just what was left over. Most of the Chinese people had left by the time we got there. It was the central mercantile for the Chinese miners. They went in there and it was rumored they would smoke their opium, but after the Chinese population went, the store part went, but his herb practice remained. People from all over came to be treated by him. Most of the time these trips were the last resort, but he had enough success that it drew people from all over to him.

17:50 **EW** There was a grounds keeper named Charlie, an old retired fellow who came around and just stayed there. There was a little victory garden where he grew vegetables, they raised geese and chickens, and he took care of everything, time to harvest he brought it in. One day he was just gone. With my folks there he may have thought he wasn't needed anymore. He was a very nice fellow. When the gold dredge came through they left a lot of rock piles and ponds and underground water came through from nearby Canyon Creek, and somehow fish got in there and we would fish and hunt the ducks.

20:00 **EW** There was a little road that went back where the swimming pool is today. Three buildings, a couple of garages, a temple, a mill building.

21:00 **EW** Doc Hay didn't want to leave his house. Dad had built a special room for him (in our house), but in the end he wanted to stay in his house. He was by himself over there when he fell and broke his hip. He smoked cigars all the time, one time he fell asleep and started a fire, but after that he didn't smoke anymore.

22:25 **EW** Someone was very clever ... they ran a wire above across the street to guide him right to the outhouse. He knew where he was going all the time.

23:15 **EW** It was a mercantile supply center for the Chinese population at that time. But it had stopped functioning for many years when we got there. The biggest part of the mining was in 1862-1880, and then the Chinese population started to disperse. There were a few who stayed on and worked on the local ranches, but very few.

24:30 **EW** All I know about (Lung On) was from people who lived there. He was quite a ladies man and enjoyed life. They had a car dealership and a lot of other businesses uptown, too. I think it was a Pontiac/Chevy dealership.

25:40 **EW** (Doc Hay) was a small fellow, 5-2, thin throughout his life, but a very good memory. He could recognize a person who walked in years after just by the sound of his voice. His blindness brought out his other senses and made them stronger.

26:40 **EW** He had Chinese bike slippers, cotton trousers, and a maroon cardigan sweater. Dress was not important because he never did go anywhere.

27:30 **EW** He had long narrow fingers, very sensitive hands. He never liked short fingernails, his were fairly long.

28:20 **EW** I would observe him (treating patients). The most fascinating part was the pulse diagnosis and telling the patient what was wrong with them. Then he said I can do this for you, and it will be ok. He would get the herbs, put them in glass jars, or old whiskey bottles, and they'd come back a day or two later and pick up the herbs, and come back in a couple of weeks for a progress check.

28:50 **EW** In the front room there was a drop-leaf front table. A pillow was at one end. The stools were wooden stools ... hand made. The patient would sit on a stool and put their wrist on a pillow and he would conduct the examination. It wasn't a big plushy thing, just a little pillow about 8" x 8".

31:25 **EW** There were other treatments, but I wasn't allowed to see them. They would take them into the back room and scrape their backs and do other treatments. I remember one time after Doc Hay died a patient came from Burns. He couldn't walk in, they carried him in, but Dad scraped his back with something and I was surprised to see him walk out again.

32:50 **EW** The doctors (of John Day) were unfamiliar with herbal practice. Their training was in another area. He had several bouts with the medical society who tried to force him out of practice. But the local people wouldn't testify against him so each time they tried it would fail. The fact that they weren't familiar with herbal practice disturbed them that he was working without a license.

34:30 **EW** He was trained in China, but I'm not familiar with it. They go through a monastery like monks with rituals for training.

35:00 **EW** When they opened Kam Wah Chung they found \$23,000 in uncashed checks. In his mind, that was money. When he needed money, he would just reach in and get a check and cash it. So, when he was paid with a check he was just store it and just left them there. When they found these things they were years old. Lung On did most of the banking when he was around, so I guess he had most of the money.

37:00 **JW** Did Doc Hay have a family in China? **EW** Yes, he had a daughter, but we could never locate any family members. Like most Chinese, he started a family back there thinking they would be reunited, but it never happened. My dad couldn't find any record.

38:20 **EW** E.B. Wing, my uncle, lived in Portland. He was a nice person. I feel like I had two fathers. He was the one who would come visit and read to me and tell me stories. He lived in Portland.

39:45 **EW** (Doc Hay) had no formal education here in the states, but I think he did quite well with the English language under the circumstances. In general he knew what he was saying.

40:40 **EW** At certain times he would use a special phrase or two, but I never saw any difficulties with patients.

41:00 **EW** The Chinese community was totally gone by the time we were there. Later on a family would come in, but that was only the other family that was there.

42:00 **EW** We went there in '42 and left in '50. That was home, that was where I grew up, so I had a lot of friends there. I would say that was the highlight of my life meeting all those people and some of my closest friends today were from there.

44:00 **EW** I went back to John Day in my dental practice for about seven years, then moved back to Portland. That was seven very long years for my wife ... like moving to the end of the world. I still owe her one!

45:20 **EW** My father married Lily and they were the last two Chinese in John Day.

45:45 **EW** I've been a contributor to the museum, but that's about all. I'm glad they got control of the building.

46:30 **EW** Chinese herb practice goes back over 1000 years, starting out as a family thing. Probably in China that was the practice, every family knew what to do and it was handed down, so most of it wasn't a formal education but a family thing.

48:00 **EW** Over here, we get our education first and learn the effects of drugs on illness and then we practice and get licensed to treat people in the right way.

48:40 **EW** (John Day doctors) didn't refer (patients) to him as much, but he knew his limitations and he would tell them if there was something he couldn't do something about, especially during the war when medicine couldn't come from China. He couldn't do surgery and had to refer them to medical people. But they didn't know when to refer patients to him. Word of mouth, "Why don't you try Doc Hay," was a source of many of the referrals.

51:00 **EW** He did have so much success where everything else failed. One of the areas was breast cancer. He had these herbs that would make a poultice and it would draw out the bad tissue. One time a local rancher accidentally cut his hand and he got blood poisoning and started creeping up his arm. (The doctors) recommended they cut his arm off at the elbow. It took about six months, but my dad was able to get the blood poisoning out of his system and saved his arm and three of his fingers. Very fascinating.

53:30 **EW** Herbal medicine somehow has something that can draw out infected tissues.

54:00 **EW** I don't know what they were, but I have had to take medicine that my dad would make for me and it is bitter and it is sour and it is awful to take, and my dad said you can put some honey in it.

55:00 **EW** The one thing Doc Hay said, we don't do abortions. They could do it with an herb, but he said it's bad luck so we don't do this.

56:00 **EW** (On cowboy stoicism) They say, "I'll get by, I'll get along," until they can't do it anymore, then they seek help. Cowboys lived a harsh life and had to be tough people. You go and try yourself and do the best you can until you can't do any more. All medical people felt this way.

57:20 **EW** I think most of it was patient/doctor relationship. I don't think they had close friendships or anything, but mostly because of what he could do for them. That was their last chance.

58:30 **EW** (On the mystery of the wall of cans.) Unless you're an herbalist, you'd not be familiar with all of them. He knew what they were and where it was.

59:20 **EW** From the time he went to John Day and Doc Hay turned it over to him.

Tape 2

00:01:00 **JW** Introduction

2:00 **EW** (On racial conflict in John Day.) When I went to John Day I was a child, so I didn't experience anything of that nature. But as I got into high school and started going out in the community more, the lumber business was beginning to grow and after the war we needed a lot of lumber. People from the south came up to work in the mill and then we had problems. John Day people were very, very nice people who respected us as we respected them. There were no conflicts or feelings of animosity or racial differences with native Grant County people, but when the others moved in was when I started feeling uncomfortable. On Saturday nights there was a dance and I felt my sixth sense tingling at times.

5:00 **EW** I'm sure there were problems when some of the cowboys got drunk, there were some shootings around in the early days, but the Chinese at large knew their place in the community and we didn't try to force our way into anything like some of the other groups at different times. We quietly went about our lives and that was one of the reasons we've succeeded.

6:20 **EW** (On written medical records.) Nobody kept medical records. (My dad) followed Doc Hay's practice and didn't keep any records, only financial. But as far as the condition or medical condition, it was all in the head. They had fabulous memories. Nothing was written down.

7:36 **EW** What if they didn't work? I'm sure there were, but they were very honest about it. "I don't know, this may not work, and we can try it, but if it doesn't work we'll try something else."

They would analyze the patient and tell the patient what was wrong with them, but if it was an iffy situation they would tell them, not drag them out, if it doesn't work they would tell them this is all we could do for you. Nobody hears of the failures.

9:55 **JW** Did Doc Hay practice emergency medicine? **EW** Not where there's physical damage, but where there's an illness they had herbs that would produce quick results in an emergency.

10:45 **EW** Doc Hay was a very religious person. He had full faith in God and wanted to live that life. He tried to do everything the right way. He considered (his skill) a gift from god. In his early days he was like everybody else, tried to enjoy life. He probably had the first auto dealership in John Day, and they went all over the country enjoying themselves.

12:50 **EW** There was a shrine in the store, he would light it up every morning, fill it with oil, he was a faithful devout Buddhist.

13:50 **JW** Chinese contributions to the community? **EW** Apparently we did it the right way because, by the time I got there, there wasn't any lingering animosity or ill feelings toward our people. We coexisted very nicely. From what I understand the Chinese were the only other (non-Caucasian) group in that area because they were the miners. There were a couple of thousand or more, and where they were building railroads they were there, too.

16:50 **EW** We didn't do a lot in Kam Wah Chung as children. My duties, when I came home from school, were to gather the wood for the dinner. There was a wood shed across the road, I would bring it over and have it ready. Then we would do our homework, eat dinner, do dishes, and go to bed. On weekends, I would go out with my friends and either play around the old buildings, playing cowboys and Indians. We found a couple of big long rifles that we used to play with. I wish I still had them! But as we grew up I did more hunting and fishing, hike out over the hill to McGoan Lake to fish, a great place to grow up in.

19:10 **EW** Fishing was good, hunting was good. Doc hay and Lung On are buried in the cemetery on the hill along with my folks.

21:10 **EW** I wish I could say I knew enough about (herbal medicine) to use it in my practice, but I got interested in nutrition supplements and improving dental conditions by supplements, that's my limit of herbal practice.

22:10 **EW** Starting in the '70s, the holistic medicine practice started and I was involved in that.

23:00 **EW** (Overview of holistic medicine.) Personally I'm glad it came about because I was going downhill myself. I thought I was eating well, but I also ate my dessert and we find out that the sugar upsets the body mechanism, so I started eliminating some of that and I started feeling better. I used to have migraines so bad that I'd have to drag myself home from work. When my third child was born, she decided to have it in John Day. The day he came I had the worst migraine ever. She had to call her girlfriend to take her to the hospital. I talk a lot about nutrition to my patients.

27:00 **EW** Drs Martha and Jerry (Van der Vlugt), were always on a first name basis. They were pillars of the community. He had good surgical skill, probably developed from the treating all the (auto) accidents around Grant County. Dr. Martha, very kind hearted lady. Their family grew up in John Day. They had the only hospital to take care of sick people. Dr. Martha was in Washington D.C. during the late '60s, but never lost her roots for John Day.

30:20 **EW** I never saw (Doc Hay) make house calls. He doesn't drive, and outside his immediate area he didn't go (due to his blindness), but my dad did. Recreation for Doc Hay was the radio in the years I knew him. The only time he left the house was when he got his hair cut. He didn't even like to go out and eat. It was a long drive from John Day everywhere. When he broke his hip we had to bring him to Portland to the nursing home, but that was it. He realized that after being in the nursing home for three years he realized he wasn't going to get better so he just willed himself away.

35:15 **EW** Nobody went in his room. (Were you ever treated by Doc Hay?) I was a healthy child and my first experience with the medical herb was with hay fever and that was in medical school in Eugene.

37:15 **EW** The remoteness of John Day was a problem. It was hard to get a practitioner in those days. The center was in Portland where the wives wanted to be. In the latter stages of my stay they built a nice community hospital and attracted three more physicians so, medically, it became pretty well staffed. John Day was the center for Grant County, and all the ranchers would come there for their needs.

EW When I arrived in John Day there were two other practicing dentists there, Dr Prophet and Dr. Medically and dentally, we were pretty well taken care of. But to keep them there was the thing. When I left, Dr. Peterson moved to John Day. His wife was from Long Creek, so that made a happy situation there. Dr. Gibson came in shortly after I started. That's the most difficult part of rural practice, getting them to want to stay, and not having a larger center to consult with other people. The idea of paying the students to go through training in exchange for so many years in rural practice might be a good idea. Students are coming out of school with a lot of debt.

EW Ted Merrill was there when I was there Very nice person. He returned to John Day for his retirement. He's different, down to earth, liked to get to know his patients, like extended families. It's fun that way. He was like me. I hear that he is back in John Day and intends to stay there. Ted had another associate and they both were there for years and did good things around the community.

45:00 **EW** Dr. Sam Liu was a practitioner (in Portland) who was a well-known surgeon. My dad flew to Portland to have Dr. Liu do the emergency appendectomy because he didn't trust anyone else. In general I think in the medical and dental area we are pretty good people.

47:40 **EW** One of the best things that has happened to medicine is the advent of computers. Data is stored easily and easily recalled. My son being in that area developed systems where they put in symptoms and pull up the treatment, the symptoms to look for, and some of the medicines. People who practice in remote areas can use the computer to pull it up quickly. Another is I hope our government will continue to resist universal health. From what I have seen of universal health, you won't be able to get in for treatment because of the congestion

50:00 **EW** Managed Care is an area where patients signed up for it and get highly discounted fees. The practitioner is doing it as a charity offer because there's no profit in it. If this comes about as a universal practice, a lot of the patients aren't going to be able to find treatment, so it limits the offices they can go into for treatment. Long lines, long waiting. We need to do something to get care to some of these people who can't afford it, but I don't know that the answer is universal health. My own physician has notified me that with my Medicare and my supplemental, it isn't enough to keep me on as a patient. Wow! That's with Medicare and Blue Cross supplement. If we get too low in compensation, we can't keep it open.

53:30 **EW** The Doctor/Patient part is the part that has kept me in dentistry for over 40 years. These patients are part of my extended family. I really enjoy them. I just like people, I guess. We established a good relationship, three generations, because we enjoy each other. They come in to visit. That's probably not good practice to get that involved with patients. Somewhere along the line you have to establish some form of doctor patient relationship. We need to be somewhat concerned about their problems and do what we can. That's been my philosophy.

56:50 **EW** One good way to avoid problems with patients is to establish a good relationship with them from the first. If something happened, be upfront with them. Tell them it wasn't the result you expected, and tell them if I feel it's something I could have done better, I would refund their fees or discount the fee for correcting the situation. As far as admitting something went bad, yes, they would like to know that, but they will also understand. It starts with doctor patient relationships.

59:00 Closing Slate